DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 678 CS 213 479

AUTHOR Connelly, Colette
TITLE Lorna Dee Cervantes: A Writer in the Margins.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Characterization; College English; Cultural Context; *Feminism; Figurative Language; Legends; *Literary Criticism; *Mexican American Literature; *Poetry
IDENTIFIERS *Cervantes (Lorna Dee); *Feminist Criticism; Male Female Relationship

ABSTRACT

Chicana literary authors are sometimes thought to occupy the edges of two "texts," their own culture and the Anglo-American hegemony, where they are oppressed and marginalized by sexism and racism. In these margins, however, Chicana authors can dismantle stereotypes and construct new and empowering images of self. As an example of this kind of recreation of self through the act of writing, the poems of Lorna Dee Cervantes can serve as powerful examples. Many archetypal female figures have shaped the stereotypes of Chicano literature, the most influential being the story of "La Malinche," who acquiesces to sexual violation. Cervantes' early poem, "You Cramp My Style, Baby," attacks and denounces such sexual exploitation. In a later poem, "Emplumada," Cervantes' attack on the misogynous representations of "La Malinche" culminates in a complete revision of the character. The treatment of various images in the poem shows how Cervantes discovers and invents new inscriptions for the future. Thus, the second poem rewrites the female-male relationship that governed the earlier poem while simultaneously revising the legend of "La Malinche." (Twenty-two references are attached.) (HB)

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Colette Connelly

Texas Christian University

P.O. Box 29107

Ft. Worth, TX 76129

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Texas Christian University
P.O. Box 29107
Ft. Worth, TX 76129

Lorna Dee Cervantes: A Writer in the Margins

Chicana literary discourse frequently invokes the metaphor of multiple marginalization (Melville 1-2) to describe the social contexts in which contemporary Chicanas write. This body of theory suggests that Chicana authors occupy the edges of two "texts," their own culture and Anglo-American hegemony. There they encounter multi-faceted oppression, for they are marginalized by sexism, racism, and a "dominant ideology" that privileges English and devalues Spanish, their "mothertongue" (Ortega and Sternbach 14). In these margins, however, Chicana authors both "dismantle" pejorative stereotypes that society scripts for them and consciously construct new, empowering images of self--they recreate themselves in and by writing. Chicana poetry and prose thus launch an attack on marginalization in which writing itself becomes an empowering weapon. As a result, self-authoring emerges as a dominant theme in Chicana discourse; one of the ways Chicana writers author self is to revise the traditional image of the Mexican-American woman that dominates her culture. Today I want to talk about two poems by Lorna Dee Cervantes which exemplify this response to marginalization, "You Cramp My Style, Baby," and "*Emplumada*." First, however, I'd like

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to examine one source of the traditional image of woman in Chicano culture.

While there are many archetypal female figures in Chicano history and legend, the story of *La Malinche*--called *Malintzin* in indigenous dialects and *Marina* in Spanish--appears to have had the most influence in forming the concept of woman that pervades Chicano culture. *La Malinche*, Norma Alarcon explains in "Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through *Malintzin*/or *Malintzin*: Putting Flesh Back on the Object," was an Aztec noblewoman whose family sold her into slavery during the Spanish conquest of Mexico (187). William Prescott's book, The Conquest of Mexico, recounts the version of *Malinche's* enslavement that Spaniard Bernal Diaz de Castillo, sixteenth-century chronicler of the conquest, provides in The Conquest of New Spain. Prescott suggests that *Malinche's* mother, widow of a wealthy Aztec lord whose second marriage produced a son, sold *Malinche* to itinerant traders in order to retain her inheritance for this second child. Subsequent owners delivered *Malinche* to Hernando Cortes, Mexico's conqueror. Prescott and contemporary Chicana feminists report that *Malinche* was fluent in many indigenous dialects, quickly learned Spanish, and, unquestionably loyal to Cortes and the Spaniards, helped them establish and maintain control of Mexico. *Malinche*, therefore, is an historical person; she was Cortes' mistress, his translator and advisor, and she bore his children, the first *mestizas* and *mestizos*--Mexicans, Chicanas, and Chicanos. But she is also a cultural icon and the mythology

which surrounds her defines and embodies femininity in Chicano culture.

Traditionally, Mexican and Mexican-American legends portray *La Malinche* in a much darker light than I just did. Customarily, stories about her represent *La Malinche* acquiescing to sexual violation and suggest she betrays her children to the conqueror even as she conceives them. Octavio Paz, the Nobel prize-winning Mexican philosopher, writes as much in The Labyrinth of Solitude. Briefly studying the etymology of *chingada*, a synonym that frequently substitutes for *Malinche* and suggests violent sexual aggression against a passive sufferer, he concludes:

> The *Chingada* is the Mother forcibly opened, violated deceived. . . . In effect, every woman--even when she gives herself willingly--is torn open by the man, is the *Chingada*. . . . But the singularity of the Mexican [compared to the Spaniard], I believe, resides in his violent, sarcastic humiliation of the Mother. (80)

Cervantes' early poem, "You Cramp My Style, Baby," employs irony to attack and, as Elizabeth Ordonez writes, "angrily denounce [such] sexual exploitation" (324). In the first stanza, the speaker points to her lover's hypocrisy. The exclamatory "*Viva la Raza*" (3), a popular slogan among Mexican-American civil rights workers and protesters during the seventies, signals his duplicity and demonstrates that he confines the speaker--"cramps her style" (1)--even as he rebels against the oppressiveness of racism in hegemonic society.

In the second stanza the speaker uses humor to explore the extent to which the male lover objectifies her in their relationship. He, and I'm paraphrasing Tey Diana Rebolledo's essay entitled "Walking the Thin Line: Humor in Chicana Literature" (101), makes the woman into a piece of food--Mexican of course--to be consumed:

> You want me *como* [like] un *taco*,
> dripping grease,
> or squeezing *masa* [moist dough] through my legs,
> making *tamales* for you out of my daughters. (5-8)

He also infantilizes her in stanza three, addressing her as "*mija*" or my daughter in much the same way he calls her his sexual "baby" or "*esa*" in lines one and 14. Cervantes sums up the woman's position--her confinement, her objectification, and her infantilization--in one word. She is, in the concluding lines of the poem, *Malinche*. Significantly, however, her lover has **molded** her into *La Malinche*. Cervantes thus attributes authorship of traditional representations of *La Malinche* to male misogyny. As Alarcon explains, "the lover's tone implies that [the speaker's] body/self is as available as the mythical *Malinche* is thought to be by male consciousness" (184).

In the later "*Emplumada*," the title piece of Cervantes' 1981 volume of poetry, her attack on misogynous representations of *La Malinche* culminates in a complete revision of her figure and its significance. The book's epigraph lists the definitions of *emplumado* and *plumada*, the two works Cervantes combined to create

the title, "*Emplumada*." The participle *emplumado* means feathered or in plumage as after molting; the noun *plumada* means the flourish of a pen (*Emplumada* 82). Just as a single word, *Malinche*, apotheosizes the female speaker's oppression in "You Cramp My Style, Baby," this word--*emplumada*--embodies the strengths of two legendary Aztec figures in Mexican history and forges them into a source of empowerment for the contemporary Chicana writer. The feminine noun *plumada*--a pen flourish--refers, I think, to *La Malinche's* linguistic prowess. Recall that she was proficient in several indigenous dialects as well as Spanish and served as Cortes' translator (see also poems in the *Emplumada* collection such as "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" that refer to the female speaker or protagonist as the Scribe-Translator of a matriarchal family). The participle *emplumado*--feathered or in plumage--suggests images of *Quetzalcoatl*, the Aztec god of creativity who is most often depicted as a plumed serpent. Significantly, *plumada* feminizes the masculine participle. The female speaker is *emplumada;* she imbibes the creative power of the ancient masculine god, *Quetzalcoatl*, and channels it into the present by means of the linguistic power of her mythological mother, *La Malinche* (Fernandez 82, Seator 29). While the speaker observes with regret the verdant, colorful flowers of summer fade and die in the first stanza of "*Emplumada*," she is also able to "redefine . . . love" (Seator 25) in stanza two's description of battling hummingbirds:

two hummingbirds, hovering, stuck to each other,

arcing their bodies in grim determination
to find what is good, what is
given them to find . . . . (11-14)

The past, represented by the brilliant flowers that frequently serve as archetypal symbols of Pre-Columbian glory, has withered into a cultural memory. But the hummingbirds, reminiscent of the hummingbirds maintained in Aztec aviaries (Prescott 237-38) who were nourished by the nectar of now-faded blossoms, survive in the present. Released from their cages and bound together on one plane, neither one dominant nor subsumed by the other, they are determined to discover--**invent**--new and different inscriptions for the future which will replace their ancient, misogynistically prescribed destiny:

. . . These are warriors
distancing themselves from history.
They find peace
in the way they contain the wind
and are gone. (15-18)

Thus Cervantes, in "*Emplumada*," rewrites the female-male relationship that governed "You Cramp My Style, Baby." In "*Emplumada*" the lovers are an equally matched, ungendered pair of warriors engaged in revising history and society. The poem's speaker--now an observer recording their partnership instead of an angry victim of masculine sexual aggression--simultaneously re-authors both the legend of *La Malinche* and her own fate. In translating *La Malinche* into an empowering source of poetic

inspiration she also releases herself from the violation and passive submission to which the misogynous, masculine myth of *La Malinche* relegated her.

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